Title: Pushed into the Dirt by the System

Nirmal Gurung

Pushed into the Dirt by the System

Abstract

This paper provides a Neo-Marxist literary reading of Cho Myung-hee's short story "Into the Ground" (1925), which examines the systematic destruction of Korean family, community, and individual dreams under Japanese colonial rule in the economic order of colonialism. Through close reading, this analysis argues that the protagonist's poverty, familial conflict and eventual loss of identity are not the results of personal failure but are direct consequences of structural violence, colonial exploitation and manufactured false consciousness. By placing Cho's work in historical context, the paper argues that the story is a brave political critique for which the author ultimately paid with his life. The analysis concludes that Cho's narrative is still urgently relevant as a reminder that systemic inequality, and not individual moral failing, drives social suffering.

Keywords: *Into the Ground*, Cho Myung-hee, Neo-Marxism, Korean Literature, Colonialism, Social Justice, Class Struggle, Literary Analysis

---

Introduction: The Story in Short

“Into the Ground” is a story about a young man returning to Seoul after studying in Tokyo, Japan. He’s got big dreams. He wishes to be a writer. He wants to make his family proud. But when he reaches home he finds something horrible. It has reduced his family to dire poverty. They live in a small dark room. They have very little food. They sometimes eat millet porridge. Sometimes they eat nothing. The children look like “grains of rice in a bowl” because they are skinny and huddled together for warmth (Cho 12). His mother is anxious and tired. His father is angry and bitter. Everybody is cold and hard. The narrator begins with hope. But in the end he gives up. He knows he can’t run away. He's trapped inside the system.

If one reads this story through a Neo-Marxist lens, it’s not just a story about a sad family, but an attack on the system of how money and power crush the average person. Neo-Marxism holds that the structure of a country’s economy and class system is the source of most social problems and that everything else, human relationships, dreams, and even love, grows from that foundation. As Cho Myung-hee demonstrates, this is devastatingly accurate.

The System Is Built to Hurt Them

This family is not poor because they are lazy or made poor choices. They are poor because Japan took over Korea and took everything . This is the most important

thing to understand when approaching the text (Cho 13). Japanese rulers passed laws expropriating the best farmland from Koreans during the colonial period. They levied heavy taxes . They forced Koreans to work in factories and mines for starvation wages . All wealth that was accumulated went upwards to Japan . The colonizers became rich and the Korean people became poor. So this family should not be viewed as a bunch of failures; they are victims of a system rigged against them. They have no land, no permanent job, no political power. The rulers are at the top, stomping down, and the family is at the bottom, being crushed. It's not bad luck. It's the system working against them with malice.

They Fight Each Other Instead of the Real Enemy

The most sad part of the story is the way the family members treat each other. They don't offer comfort or love; they yell and point fingers. The parents are harsh with the children, and the narrator is revolted by his own mother when she acts desperately (Cho 14). Neo-Marxists call this “false consciousness,” where the system tricks the oppressed into fighting each other instead of the real source of their misery. The Japanese rulers are far away and strong; the family cannot strike them; so they strike each other. If five people have only one little bowl of millet, love evaporates. Parents cannot afford gentleness, and children cannot afford playfulness. All are reduced to the question of survival. The coldness in their eyes is not of their nature, it is a wound inflicted by hunger, fear and despair. The system makes family members strangers in a systematic way.

The Death of Community

In a functional society, neighbours help neighbours. In this story, that solidarity has vanished. Desperation has made everyone selfish, and trust has disintegrated. This

fragmentation is precisely what the colonial rulers desire: a divided, starving population is weak and incapable of rebellion. As long as the poor are suspicious of one another, the rulers remain secure in their dominance, watching from above while the oppressed scratch and bite each other below.

The narrator observes how hunger destroys not just bodies but also relationships. He feels shame for his family and for himself, yet this shame is misplaced. The system has forced everyone into a corner; when starving, kindness becomes an unaffordable luxury (Cho 15).

He Loses His True Self

The narrator aspires to be a writer, but he ultimately relinquishes this dream. Writing is an activity for those with full stomachs and free time resources he lacks. His mind remains in Tokyo, occupied with books, poetry, and lofty ideas, but his body aches for food in Seoul. Every time he reaches for a pen, his empty stomach reminds him of his worthlessness without money.

Neo-Marxism terms this condition *alienation*: a separation from one's true self and creative potential. The narrator is an educated, intelligent young man, but the system cares nothing for his intellect; it values only labor and survival. His talent perishes because there is no room for art in a house consumed by hunger (Cho 18). He comes to view his education as a curse; it makes him acutely aware of his degradation. If he were ignorant, perhaps the pain would be less sharp, but his intelligence allows him to perceive everything and that perception intensifies his suffering.

Falling Into the Ground

The title “Into the Ground” carries a lot of metaphorical weight. This isn't a case of one man going to the dark side, this is a whole social class being brought down to the dirt. The ground swallows them up, the rulers tread on them. They are dead but buried alive. Breathing but with dirt in their mouths, dirt in their eyes, dirt in their souls.

The colonial economy is set up to keep poor people at the bottom, and so this entrapment occurs. The ladder is broken, there’s no way up. The narrator thought education would be his salvation but even that lets him down. Still starving, he comes home from Tokyo with a degree. The system shows no mercy it just keeps pushing people down (Cho 20).

The Author's Brave Choice

This story was written by Cho Myung-hee in 1925 when the Japanese colonial authorities had total control of print media and Koreans were not allowed to criticize the regime publicly. But Cho wrote this story to reveal the ugly truth of how colonial rule was destroying Korean families. He did not just chronicle the misfortune of one family, he wrote a quiet but devastating indictment of the government as a whole. For this literary courage he was arrested, tortured and finally killed. He paid the highest price for speaking the truth. He was silenced by the colonial masters as they knew angry and awakened people are a threat to the tyrants. Cho knew the risk and went ahead and wrote anyway.

Conclusion: A Final Thought

This story is profoundly sad, but it is also profoundly angering. Empathy is not enough; it changes nothing. Cho's story demonstrates that unless societies radically change how power and money work, this destructive cycle will repeat itself forever.

It's still tempting to look at homeless people or struggling families and say they're lazy or poor decision makers. But Cho Myung-hee shows how entire nations can be forced into poverty by those who govern them. Suffering is not always a sign of individual failure, but it can be the result of structural violence a system that was intentionally built to crush certain groups (Cho 22). People hungry will keep fighting each other if they are allowed to. Dreams will keep dying if they are allowed to. Families will keep disintegrating if they are allowed to. And more people will be shoved in the ground if they are allowed to. Society has to choose something else: see the system clearly, choose action over judgment, remember brave writers like Cho Myung-hee who gave up their lives so that the truth could be told.

Works Cited

Cho, Myung-hee. *Into the Ground*. Translated by Mi-Ryong Shim, Literature Translation Institute of Korea, 2014.